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RESERVE

TELLING THE STORY OF RESEARCH

Talk by E. G. Moore, Coordinator of Research Publication, Agricultural Research Administration, U. S. Department of Agriculture, at Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Annual Conference, November 9, 1951.

If you have a dollar and I have a dollar and we decide to exchange them we both end up with a dollar. Neither has benefited from the trade.

Now let's suppose you have an idea and I have one. If we exchange ideas we each end up with two. Both have gained a new idea, and if the new idea is one that is useful both of us have profited by the trade.

This simple little story illustrates a fundamental principle in the work of research and extension in agriculture. We may not like to share our wealth, but we all enjoy sharing knowledge. The founding fathers took advantage of this trait of human nature in laying the foundations of our great system of land-grant colleges. The whole plan of operation is based upon acquiring and diffusing useful information. That is also the concept on which the USDA was founded.

Incidentally, I am using exact language from the organic act that created the Department and the land-grant colleges. It said that it shall be the duty of the Department to acquire and diffuse useful information on agriculture, in the broadest sense of that term.

To me that language means that those responsible for agricultural research have done only half their duty when they acquire useful information. To finish the job they must diffuse that information to all who might possibly benefit by it. I think most of the research directors in this country agree on that. I also think that most of them realize that we are not doing as good a job as we could in reporting.

We in the Department have had this fact brought home to us rather emphatically in the last year or two. The advisory committees set up under the amendment to the Bankhead-Jones Act known as the Research and Marketing Act

have praised our research on many occasions, but in several instances they have not been satisfied with our job of reporting. I shall come back to some of these recommendations later on, but here I merely call attention to them to record the fact that there seems to be pretty general agreement among those who know our work that we are not doing as good a job as we should to tell others about it.

Before going further, I'll try to make clear just what we are talking about. There is no single official definition of what we mean by information, so I shall have to give you my own concept. I suspect that most of you will agree with it.

What are the broad objectives of information work? To me the No. 1 objective is to present results of research to all who can benefit, and do it in such a way that people will want to try out the discoveries of research. That's a pretty large order, so let's begin at the source and work outward from there. The first essential is publication of original research, largely for the benefit of other scientists. These papers are the building stones of progress for this and future generations.

Actually the reporting job should begin long before there are final results available for a formal publication. In fact, it ought to begin with the planning of the research and go on throughout its life. Publications often provide high spots for news stories, but we miss a great opportunity to enlist public interest in our work if we fail to release progress reports from time to time. We need to do a better job of explaining why a line of research was undertaken and what its objectives are. All of us who write or talk about research should keep in mind that this work is terribly important to farm people, and it must be reported to them in terms of actual needs.

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One of the most useful vehicles in reporting research is the popular version of the technical paper. In 20 years as a science writer I cannot recall a single instance where scientists have refused to cooperate with writers and editors in preparing popular accounts of their work. I have, of course, run into many situations that called for tact, for patience, and for assurance that I was not going to make the scientist appear ridiculous in the eyes of his colleagues and other well-informed people.

In fairness to all concerned, I have often felt that the scientists who objected to having their work "popularized" were usually justified in their actions.

Too often the writer, whether from the staff or from a newspaper or magazine, has displayed deplorable ignorance of the subject, coupled with a determination to get a story at any price. Some of the research workers at the stations and in the Department deserve special commendation for their forbearance at the hands of headline-happy writers.

When the technical paper is published and the popular story has been written, we have made a beginning. But that is all. In most States and in the Department the story will be broadcast by radio, usually at the time it is given to the press. That, too, is part of the routine of getting out a story, and, I might add, a most useful part. But we still have only begun to do the information job.

The mere announcement of research results is not enough for a research agency supported by public funds. Farmers want to know a lot more about a new discovery before they put their money into it. If the county agent calls a meeting and has a speaker from the college who knows the answers, farmers will give serious thought to changing a practice. But if he goes a step further and says that a farmer in an adjoining county is trying the new practice this year and is making money out of it, then I suspect your farmer will really become interested.

There are many other tried and proved extension methods which might be used to get farmers interested, but we will leave those for Mr. Gibson, your next speaker, to discuss. I'm glad your chairman arranged the program to have a discussion of extension work follow immediately after this talk.

The fact that you have an alert and energetic group of extension workers in Texas, for example, doesn't mean, however, that you research people have no responsibility for reporting your work in common everyday language. I'm not here to tell you just where your responsibility ends and theirs begins. I am certain, however, that the total efforts will add up to a great deal more if research people assume part of the responsibility.

The job of reporting research begins with the man who is doing it, and that means each one of you. Every time you entertain a visitor at one of the branch stations, or talk to your local newspaper editor, or answer a letter asking about your work, you are reporting research. Some of you doubtless look upon these duties as chores that interrupt a busy day. If the county agent or one of the civic clubs invites you to speak at a local meeting, you have a wonderful opportunity to tell the research story to the people who are paying for it and who stand to benefit from it. The editor at the college can polish up your manuscripts and sift out material for a news story, but he can't do your local job of public relations for you.

Some of the most successful salesmen of science in the Department of Agriculture are superintendents of field stations. We have one man in a nearby State who is a past master at this. He has a field day every fall, and it isn't unusual for him to have 10,000 farmers and ranchers visit the station on that day. He gets out stories well in advance, giving the highlights of his program. One year when it was impossible for him to hold the annual field day, he got out a release saying so, and I am told that this

story was used just about as widely as if he had been announcing a field day. This man is working for the public and he knows it. He understands that when the public loses interest in his work, it will cease to support it.

How Can We Do A Better Job?

I began by saying that agricultural research is not complete until it is reported to the public. I have sketched briefly my ideas of the job that faces all of us in research and have touched on a few of the ways we get the job done. At this point I think it is pertinent to ask ourselves a question. Are we doing the job adequately?

To get an answer to this question, we should go outside our own ranks and ask those for whom we are working. I doubt if we could get a better sample than the people who comprise the advisory committees established under the Research and Marketing Act. These committees are made up of producers, distributors, processors, and consumers. They have about the same relation to Department research as the Cattlemen's Association or the Wool Growers' Association have to your work. I mentioned earlier that several of these committees have complimented us on the fact-finding phases of our research but have told us frankly that they think we should do a better job of reporting it.

With this situation in mind, the Research Administrator of the Department invited a group of editors and trade association representatives to meet with us two days last spring and give suggestions for improving our information work. We spent the first day telling the committee what we did. The second day the committee met in executive session and prepared its recommendations. I hope you will keep in mind that this committee was considering only the research work of the Department. It would not have been practical for us to attempt to acquaint them with the work of all of the experiment stations. This would have required a much longer meeting, and we would have needed a

representative from each of the stations. Although these recommendations were made to the Department, I suspect that they have considerable application to your work here in Texas and at experiment stations in other States as well.

I will not take the time now to discuss the recommendations one by one, but I'll mention those I consider most important.

I am going to start with a recommendation that I know will be of special interest to you folks. "We recommend that field people be encouraged and directed to give more attention to reporting their work locally. It is important to have as many folks as possible tell about research, especially in the areas where it is being conducted." I understand that you folks in Texas do a good job of reporting your work locally, and I congratulate you. I am told that your director encourages you to talk before local groups, and I'm sure you find this time well spent. If the reporting job is anywhere near what I have outlined, I am sure we all agree that it is far too big for the information staff. It is so big that the only way we can ever hope to do it adequately is for everybody to pitch in and help.

Another recommendation was that bureau and agency heads give stronger support generally to information operations. "We are convinced," the committee stated, "that agricultural research is a good investment for the Nation, but it will not be supported wholeheartedly unless farmers, processors, wholesalers, retailers, and consumers understand how they individually benefit from it." The committee went on to say that this/^{is} objective worthy of the best talent in the Department. This means that you folks and your directors are all partners with the editor of your station in the job assigned to him.

Even though research workers and administrators do everything the committee recommended, most of our institutions are still going to find that they can never do an adequate job of information with the limited help now

available. The committee recognized this and recommended that we increase our staff of research writers. In the ARA we have approximately 5,500 people doing research. We have another 5,500 on regulatory and control work. We have 13 research writers. These people spend much of their time on related work, such as preparing letters for bureau chiefs and official reports that never get to the public. I understand that you have over 300 people on the research staff here in Texas, with $1\frac{1}{2}$ people on the station staff reporting it. Assuming the extension editor's staff devotes about the same amount of time in its follow-up work, you would have a total of 3.

I present these facts for your consideration. To me, they are packed with implications. If the reporting job is worth doing at all, it should be clear that we in ARA cannot do it with only 1% of our research staff working at it, and you can't do it in Texas with 1% of your staff. That's why public information is your job as well as mine. It seems to me it has to be the job of every person in the organization, from the director on down to the lowest-paid employee. I believe there is an increasing awareness of this.

Research agencies, both State and Federal, have been scrupulously conservative in hiring writers and editors. In the Department of Agriculture, information people are under the scrutiny of Congress most of the time, and this is one reason why we have so few science writers in the ARA. Another reason is that research agencies seldom get as much money as they need. Before budgets are presented to Congress, every item is gone over carefully, and only the most urgent ones are included. It is only natural, therefore, that when appropriations are made, those in charge feel that research itself has first claim.

Many of the emergency Government agencies created in recent years have had large-scale action programs, using large information staffs. The result is that all information people in the Federal Government are often looked

upon in some quarters as publicity people whose main concern is agency promotion. We in the Department do our best not to merit such a reputation, and I can say emphatically that the information people in ARA are doing the kind of work called for in the organic act. Nevertheless, the general feeling in Washington about information people has restricted the job we can do in reporting agricultural research. This is not an alibi, but an explanation.

We find ourselves in a peculiar position. We are under constant pressure from our advisory committees to do more information work -- not less. Members of Congress who are in key positions to know and understand our information work have praised it within the last few months. One very fine statement was made when the Chief of the Office of Experiment Stations appeared before the House Appropriations Committee and showed several publications from State experiment stations. You will find it on page 270 of the House Hearings for 1952. In spite of all this, when a blanket cut was made some time ago in funds that could be spent for information, we were included along with all others. We were, however, gratified that Congress made a number of exceptions in the Department of Agriculture.

The next recommendation was that if sufficient funds to improve research reporting are not available from administrative sources, "we recommend that research be curtailed to the extent necessary to strike a proper balance between the amount of research undertaken and the means of getting results to the public."

I would not expect research men to agree wholeheartedly with this recommendation. At the same time, I'm sure you do appreciate the dilemma that faces your research directors in trying to stretch their resources. I hope you will give serious thought to this problem.

Another recommendation of the committee was that research agencies do more, not only about getting research results into the hands of those who can use them in making a living, but also keep in mind urban people who need a better understanding of the ultimate benefits to themselves from agricultural research.

Although we still think of farm people as our primary audience, we must enlarge our horizon to include those who live in towns and cities. These people make up five-sixths of our population, and they pay a corresponding share of the taxes that support agricultural research.

There is no doubt that our work benefits every person in the land, but I doubt if people generally know this. Livestock research has contributed greatly to human medicine. Much of the present understanding of human nutrition is based on work done at State agricultural experiment stations. Penicillin and streptomycin came from agricultural laboratories. The Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics in the ARA and the Departments of Home Economics in the experiment stations are working full time for consumers, most of whom live in towns and cities.

The advisory committee went along with the Doane Study Group appointed by the House Committee on Agriculture in recommending that the ARA publish a research periodical in popular language giving brief results of research and explaining why work is undertaken. The periodical would be made widely available to State and Federal research workers, extension workers, vocational agriculture teachers, editors, farm broadcasters, and officials of trade associations.

We have needed a journal of this type for many years. People no longer have the time or the inclination to read lengthy documents. They want to get the story in a few words. I know we can prepare such a journal in and,

because several of the State stations are already doing it. Incidentally, some of them are replacing their annual reports with bright, interesting-looking monthly or quarterly journals.

You may be interested to know that the Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy recently asked the president of the college editors' organization to appoint a committee to make a study of station annual reports to see if they were serving a useful purpose. We will be much interested in their report. You folks in research use modern tools and techniques. We need to modernize the reporting of your work. We've got to make our publications attractive if we want people to read them. We've got to use radio and television, movies and exhibits, and last but by no means least -- we've got to keep the extension folks in mind. They are our partners in one of the most worth-while causes I know.

It is often said that it takes a generation to translate a basic discovery into wide application. We have witnessed this with automobiles, radio, and television. It's also been true in agriculture. But this is too long to wait. I'm sure we can shorten this period of waiting for the fruits of science by doing a better job of information and education.

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